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\$6.5 Million State Commitment Protects Environmentally Significant Butte County Ranch

Original Mexican Land Grant Property is Home to Several Threatened Species

SACRAMENTO – The state of California has committed \$6.5 million in funding to protect 4,235 acres of agricultural land supporting an abundance of wildlife in Butte County. With this project's completion, nearly the entire Llano Seco Ranch, an 18,434-acre Mexican Land Grant, will be permanently shielded from development in a fast-growing area of California.

“We’re very pleased with this project,” said California Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman. “It protects working agricultural lands, provides a buffer for habitat critical to several special-status species, and helps to keep an organic cattle operation working. Beyond that, we’re proud of the cooperation between state and local governments and the landowners that made this vision a reality.”

Of the 4,235 acres protected under this easement, approximately 1,870 acres are in intensely managed agricultural production of walnuts, almonds, garbanzo beans, sunflowers and other crops; 1,715 acres are used for grazing; and 736 acres are covered in sloughs and riparian vegetation, including grasslands, cottonwood, and Great Valley oak forests. Most of the remainder of the ranch is already shielded from development, having been permanently sold in a combination of fee and easement to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Nature Conservancy.

Funding for the project comes from the Department of Fish and Game implementing the CALFED Ecosystem Restoration Program (\$2.57 million); the Wildlife Conservation Board (\$2.0 million); and the Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program (\$1.93 million). The California Oak Foundation (COF) and the Northern California Regional Land Trust (NCRLT) were the grant applicants, and NCRLT will hold the easement.

The Valley elderberry longhorn beetle, winter run Chinook salmon, and Swainson's hawk are some of the species with special status under the federal and state Endangered Species Acts that will be protected by the new easement. Marshes on the ranch are habitat for several flora species listed as rare and endangered in Butte County by the California Native Plant Society, such as Ferris milk-vetch, rose mallow and fox sedge.

The land in the easement area is part of the historic Central Valley floodplains of the Sacramento River and Little Butte Creek, where present-day pastures and fields surround a network of undulating natural swales and channels filled with groves of oak woodlands. The easement will protect the natural topography and seasonal flooding of this landscape. The area is one of the valley's best surviving examples of “water management without the levees”—a functioning floodplain that still supports vast seasonal and permanent wetlands, watercourses, and forested habitats.

Attached: QUOTES, ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON THE LLANO SECO EASEMENT PROJECT

Department of Fish and Game Director Ryan Broddrick: “The population in Butte County is growing, and without the protection this project offers, it wouldn’t have been surprising to see this portion of the Llano Seco Ranch developed in the near future. There are places where the highest and best end use is as habitat, open space or agricultural production, and this property is a good example.”

Wildlife Conservation Board Executive Director Al Wright: “The WCB is proud to participate in this terrific project that exemplifies the benefits of wildlife-friendly farming and further demonstrates the power and incredible opportunities provided by public/private partnerships.”

Department of Conservation Director Bridgett Luther: “It’s gratifying to help ensure that a sizable portion of the Llano Seco Ranch will always remain in agricultural use. As the population of our state grows, farmland preservation becomes critical. The California Farmland Conservancy Program offers a way to help balance the needs of the traditional agricultural economy with the needs of a growing population.”

Northern California Regional Land Trust President Jim Saake: “Llano Seco is an excellent example of wildlife-friendly farming, and we are proud to be part of the protection of such an important property.”

California Oak Foundation President Janet Santos Cobb: “Llano Seco Rancho takes one back in time when regal valley oaks, clean waterways and rich soils were taken for granted. Today, we know that we must invest time, knowledge and funding in protecting these valuable assets for our great state and its future generations. California Oak Foundation's members wish to thank all of the conservation-agriculture partners, as well as the general public for approving funding that was used for this worthy project.”

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND ON PARTICIPATING ENTITIES

CALFED's Ecosystem Restoration Program: The ERP is dedicated to improving the health of the Bay-Delta system and its watershed through restoring and protecting habitats, native species, and natural ecological processes. One objective of the ERP is to assist farmers in integrating agricultural activities with ecosystem restoration in a working landscape context. The Department of Fish and Game -- together with two federal partners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service -- implements the program.

Wildlife Conservation Board: Established in 1947, the WCB works closely with local, state, federal and private landowners and organizations to protect, restore and develop critical fish and wildlife habitat on public and private lands. In addition, the WCB provides much-needed public access facilities to California's rich and abundant fish and wildlife resources. Recognizing the important role of working landscapes such as Llano Seco in the preservation of fish and wildlife resources, the WCB emphasizes the importance of the private landowner in the preservation and sustainability of natural resources.

Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program: The CFCP is designed to ensure that the state's most valuable farmland will not be developed. Through the program, local governments and non-profit organizations can receive grants to purchase development rights from willing landowners, thus creating permanent conservation easements. Even though California's agricultural production of \$32 billion in 2004 led the nation, agricultural land is being converted rapidly for development and other uses. From 2000-2002, nearly 54,000 acres of irrigated farmland were converted to urban uses, and many thousands of additional acres were removed from production in anticipation of future urbanization.

Northern California Regional Land Trust: The Chico-based NCRLT is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the conservation and preservation of northern California's open spaces, agricultural lands and natural resources.

California Oak Foundation: Founded in 1988, the Oakland-based COF is a non-profit educational organization committed to preserving the state's oak forest ecosystem and its rural landscapes.